

*Aharei ha-Pe'ulot: If we follow our hearts, then what do our hearts follow?*¹

By: YONI GOLD

An observant Jew will notice that there are a considerable number of commandments. The *Sefer ha-Hinnukh*² observes that there seem to be an excessive number of *mitzvot* revolving around the Exodus and the Passover celebration. Do not be bothered by the quantity of paschal commandments, he insists, for there is a simple explanation. People are affected by their actions. Their thoughts and feelings are determined by the physical activities in which they take part. Therefore, a single commemorative command is not enough. For our redemption and divinely ordained position to be entrenched in our minds and hearts, we must act in accordance with those ideas. In this context, the *Hinnukh* coins the phrase “*aharei ha-pe'ulot nimsbakhim ha-levavot*” (the heart is drawn after the actions).

This principle of the *Hinnukh* may underlie the very nature of the Torah's commands. Rabbi Hananya ben Akashya (*Avot* 6:11 and *Makkot* 23b) explains that the vast array of *mitzvot* gives the people of Israel ample opportunity to accrue merit. We can see this idea in a new light after reading the *Hinnukh*. For the Jewish people to become a nation reflecting the ideals of God, they must always act in concordance with those ideals. The constant performance of *mitzvot* will draw their thoughts to God and their nation's divine mission, as well as to the specific principles which individual *mitzvot* manifest.³

Judaism is not only a religion of deed; it is a religion of the mind and heart. *Rahamana liba ba'i*—⁴ G-d desires our hearts. The recognition that our hearts are affected by our actions may also be the impetus for another statement of *Hazal*. The Talmud⁵ advises that a person perform *mitzvot*

¹ I would like to thank Dr. David Pelcovitz for reading an early version of this article and for his insightful observations.

² *Sefer ha-Hinnukh, mitzvab* 16.

³ See R. Yehezkel Levenstein, *Ohr Yehezkel*, Vol. 5: 268–269.

⁴ *Sanhedrin* 106b.

⁵ *Pesachim* 50b.

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even when not fully committed to them, for “*mi-tokeb she-lo li-sbmah bah li-shma*” (if one acts without the proper intent, then one will come to act with the proper intent). That our actions will influence our minds appears to be a related belief. The *Hinnukh*’s tenet seems simple, and in line with *Hazal*’s view, but perhaps its apparent simplicity must be reevaluated.

Does every Jew who performs the myriad *mitzvot* every day, week, and year become imbued with the Torah’s values? Are all our Jewish day school attending children, after years of compulsory commitment, leaving with a heart fully committed to *mitzva* performance?

There is more to the *Hinnukh*’s rule than meets the eye. Although he may be correct that our thoughts and feelings are influenced by our actions, there must be additional factors to this principle.

Modern research has demonstrated that our thoughts are, in fact, affected by our actions. This interaction has been observed in the realm of attitude change, priming, abstract concept elicitation, and more. How do psychologists explain the influence that performance exerts? Further, if they acknowledge that such an interaction exists, can they tell us anything about the factors inhibiting or facilitating its effect?

First, we must identify the psychological mechanism(s) which explain(s) the effect. Next, we will delineate the different factors contributing to or limiting each mechanism’s realization. Finally, we discuss implications for Jewish education.

Psychological mechanisms

Psychologists have conducted numerous studies to tease out the root elements of this effect, and several theories have been proposed to explain its underlying psychological mechanisms:

- i. *Cognitive dissonance*: One of the longest standing theories is cognitive dissonance, suggested by Leon Festinger.⁶ According to the cognitive dissonance model, a person will always limit dissonant thoughts and knowledge. If a person holds a belief, but acts in opposition to this belief, then s/he faces contradictory facts. On one hand are the opinions, but on the other hand is the knowledge that s/he has acted counter to those attitudes. This results in psychological stress, which a person must address. The balance of consonant and dissonant elements will determine what course of action is taken

⁶ For an early study and enumeration of this theory, see Leon Festinger and James M. Carlsmith, “Cognitive consequences of forced compliance,” *The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology* 58:2 (1959): 203–210.

to soothe this stress. If balance is to be maintained, then s/he will change preexisting beliefs to account for the actions which were performed. This has been demonstrated in the classroom. In one experiment, students were asked to evaluate a college course. Consistent with the cognitive dissonance model, higher ratings of the course were associated with greater student effort required by the instructor. Students who do not initially value a course are faced with dissonance when their negative thoughts are compared to the significant amount of work that was necessary to pass. If they did not value the course, then why did they work so hard? As per Festinger's theory, a greater alignment resulted between their thoughts and their actions, with their reports of the course being better.⁷

- ii. *Self-perception theory*: Daryl Bem challenged the accepted notions of cognitive dissonance and proposed an alternative: self-perception theory. He claimed⁸ that a person's internal thoughts are a function of self-observation. This is akin to the way that one determines others' thoughts and feelings through observation. If people observe their friend constantly eating ice cream, then they will infer that their friend enjoys eating ice cream. Similarly, when people "observe" themselves constantly eating ice cream, they will likewise infer that they enjoy eating ice cream. Through the same process, if people donate charity, they will deduce that they are charitable, and will be willing to give in the future. Self-inferences can also be made based on one's physiological state. If people notice their increased heart rate or sweating, they might infer that they are excited. In short, "to the extent that internal stimuli are not controlling, an individual's attitude statements may be viewed as inferences from observations of his own overt behavior and its accompanying stimulus variables."⁹ This model implies that the effect will occur even in the absence of psychological stress.

⁷ Teresa, M. Heckert, Amanda Latier, Amy Ringwald-Burton, and Colleen Drazen. "Relations among Student Effort, Perceived Class Difficulty Appropriateness, and Student Evaluations of Teaching: Is it Possible to 'Buy' Better Evaluations through Lenient Grading?" *College Student Journal* 40, no. 3 (2006): 588–596.

⁸ See, for example, Daryl J. Bem, "Self-perception: An alternative interpretation of cognitive dissonance phenomena," *Psychological Review* 74:3 (1967): 183–200.

⁹ Bem, *ibid.*

- iii. *Embodied cognition*: A more recent theory is embodied cognition, also known as grounded cognition. Embodied cognition differs from previous models of cognition in the interpretation of how memories and concepts are stored in the brain. Many theorists maintain that concepts are deposited in the brain as abstract ideas, independent of the brain areas which process our perceptions of the world. Grounded cognition, however, proposes that our concepts and memories are stored in connection to our perceptual processes. Thus, our knowledge of the world is inextricably linked with our modes of perception, and may not have a separate existence. Sight, hearing, motion, and cognitive states are all linked to memories and ideas. In the words of Lawrence Barsalou, “[a]s an experience occurs (e.g., easing into a chair), the brain captures states across the modalities and integrates them with a multimodal representation stored in memory” and “[l]ater, when knowledge is needed to represent a category (e.g., chair), multimodal representations captured during experiences with its instances are reactivated to simulate how the brain represented perception, action, and introspection associated with it.”¹⁰ As such, prompting thought about concepts will activate the brain’s perceptual areas, as if they are being sensed at that time. On the flipside, when actions are performed and the perceptual regions are activated, the concepts associated with those perceptions are activated as well. Researchers have shown that wearing particular clothing will affect psychological processes and performance, above and beyond the effect of mere material priming. Wearing a white lab coat associated with science increased care and caused participants to perform better in “attention-related tasks.”¹¹ The actions one performs and even the clothing one wears have a demonstrable effect on one’s mindset.

¹⁰ Lawrence W. Barsalou, “Grounded Cognition,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 59 (2008): 618-619. For an example of an experiment based upon the theory of grounded cognition, see Iris W. Hung and Aparna A. Labroo, “From firm muscles to firm willpower: Understanding the role of embodied cognition in self-regulation,” *Journal of Consumer Research* 37 (2010).

¹¹ Adam, Hajo and D. Galinsky Adam. “Encloded Cognition.” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 48:4 (2012): 918

With a range of theoretical processes, psychologists have devised numerous experiments. Theories differ regarding which factors are necessary to produce an effect. For example, cognitive dissonance requires that the thoughts be counter to an existing thought or belief, which would be unnecessary for self-perception. Self-perception may require that the person be aware of the actions performed,¹² while embodied cognition has no such limitation. Through the research into these and other areas, perhaps we can create a partial list of the elements that affect the influence of *aharei ha-pe'ulot nimshakvim ba-levavot*.

Inhibiting and facilitating factors

1. *Choice*: It follows from theories of cognitive dissonance and self-perception that an actor's participation by free choice will increase the likelihood of an attitude change. If a situation is counter to one's beliefs or thoughts, the choice to be involved will create a higher degree of dissonance. This greater contrast with previously held feelings is more likely to result in attitude change. This general argument would also follow from self-perception theory. If people perceive that they have chosen to take part in something, then they are more likely to assume that they enjoy or agree with this particular action. According to both theories, this should result in greater commitment to any program which people elect to be a part of. In fact, this effect has been demonstrated by researchers.¹³

The *Maharal*¹⁴ contrasts the statement of *naaseh v-nishma* with the Talmud's portrayal of *kafah aleibem bar ke-gigit*.¹⁵ On one hand, the Jewish people accepted the Torah. On the other hand, they were forced to enter the covenant under threat of death.¹⁶ The Torah must be forced upon the Jewish people, the *Maharal* contends, because its acceptance is required. Without the Torah, the world would revert to nothingness. The Jewish

¹² See the General Discussion in Fritz Strack, Sabine Stepper, and Leonard L. Martin, "Inhibiting and Facilitating Conditions of the Human Smile: A Nonobtrusive Test of the Facial Feedback Hypothesis," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54:5 (1988): 775–776.

¹³ Simon Draycott and Alan Dabbs, "Cognitive dissonance 1: An overview of the literature on and its integration into theory and practice in clinical psychology," *British Journal of Clinical Psychology* 37 (1998): 344. See also P. Mendonca, "The effects of choice and client characteristics in the behavioural treatment of overweight children," unpublished manuscript (1980), cited in Joel Cooper and Robert T. Croyle, "Attitudes and attitude change," *Annual Review of Psychology* 35 (1984): 409.

¹⁴ *Gur Aryeh, Shemot*, chap. 19, note 22.

¹⁵ *Shabbat* 88a.

¹⁶ See *Tosafot (Shabbat 88a s.v. kafah)* who also deal with this apparent inconsistency.

people must recognize that it is not truly under their power to decide whether or not to accept the Torah. However, when something is foisted upon a person, it indicates that it is not an essential or fundamental quality of that person. If they never accepted the Torah willingly, they would always be able to claim that it was not an indispensable feature of the Jewish people. Choice, maintains the *Maharat*, signifies the connection between a person and the action being performed or the endeavor being embarked upon. If an action is compelled, then as per cognitive dissonance or self-perception theories, an actor will disregard it as not reflective of his/her true feelings.

On its surface, this seems to pose a problem for the Orthodox Jew. The very word *mitzvah*, command, carries with it a note of compulsion. Furthermore, while our children age, they are compelled by their parents to act in accordance with the Torah. All hope is not lost, though. From the very title of Leon Festinger's article "Cognitive consequences of forced compliance," it is clear that these effects were observed even when the actions were induced by the researchers. In that study, Festinger concludes that the salience of outside pressure is key. When a minimal amount of pressure was applied by the researchers, the effect was evident. In the case of extreme pressure, the participants did not experience significant attitude change. When the influence of the researchers was most explicit, the participants were able to attribute their actions to an outside source and minimize the effect.

Ideally, then, the effect would be most pronounced in a context of free choice, but could also be exhibited if the force was minimal. Some research has even found a statistically significant effect when participation was devoid of any choice. When students were assigned to a "charity giving" group, they acted more altruistically throughout the duration of the experiment.¹⁷ These findings might imply that in certain circumstances, self-perception and cognitive dissonance can affect one's thoughts even in the face of explicitly forced compliance.

With this detail in mind, one recognizes that situations will fall in different places along the spectrum of free choice versus coercion. Additionally, there are both the axes of place (home, synagogue, school, etc.) and of time (children, teenagers, adults, etc.). When adults follow the *mitzvot* at home, this should be more likely to bolster their self-perceptions, and they will therefore incorporate these actions into their self-schema, with positive attitudes towards *mitzvot* following suit. Attendance at synagogue

¹⁷ Ayelet Gneezy et al., "Paying to be nice: Consistency and costly prosocial behavior," *Management Science*, suppl. *Special Issue on Behavioral Economics and Finance* (Part 1) 58:1 (2012): 179–187.

should provide the same boost, but with the caveat that actions performed there might be viewed as minimally forced due to social pressures and the expectations of others. As one looks at younger ages, the explicit pressure increases. Students in school cannot escape the fact that they are being forced to comply with the *mitzvot*; this pressure is at the forefront of their mind. Perhaps allowing students control over certain aspects of the educational process can foster some of the effects of a completely free choice.¹⁸ Choices might include which classes to take or, within a class, which areas to focus on. Perhaps students' motivation and focus during *tefillah* could be enhanced through encouragement to include personal and optional prayers, selected or created by the students. Choice within a set framework might lessen the explicit nature of outside pressure and foster a sense of agency on the part of students.

2. *Cost*: Another extension of these theories is the importance of cost or investment in the actions performed. Greater sacrifice to accomplish a goal leads to higher dissonance when that goal opposes a preexisting belief. Additionally, a higher cost will be perceived by the performer as a strongly held belief. If so, the attitude change brought on by these actions should become more pronounced, and this has been demonstrated.¹⁹

Whom do we love (or even just like)? It seems reasonable to answer that we love those who do things on our behalf. Rabbi E. E. Dessler argued that this is backwards.²⁰ In fact, he maintains, one truly comes to love others by doing *for* them. It is through giving, not receiving, that we develop attitudes of love.

This idea might be explained based on the discussed theories. The act of giving to others creates dissonance when previously held thoughts about the other person do not line up with this performance. An observer (including a person observing himself) would interpret the act of giving as a sign of love or affection. Finally, the concepts of love and affection are brought to the forefront when performing actions which are associated with those ideas, such as giving. The cost of giving, therefore, can change one's emotional position.

¹⁸ Whether based on the theories discussed or on other psychological processes, choice and control seem to reduce anxiety and even promote healthier living. See Ellen J. Langer and Judith Rodin, "The effects of choice and enhanced personal responsibility for the aged: A field experiment in an institutional setting," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 34:2 (1976).

¹⁹ Ayelet Gneezy, *ibid.*

²⁰ R. E. E. Dessler, *Mikhtav Mei-Eliyahu* Vol. 1: 36.

As it pertains to cognitive dissonance and to self-perception, the act of giving may be mediated by the sense of “cost.” If the action does not seem to indicate an actual commitment, then the action can be trivialized. This commitment can be strengthened by the notion that one has devoted resources, monetary or otherwise, to the endeavor. Research indicates that one feels more altruistic when told that he has given some of his own money to charity than when told that money has been donated by a third party on his behalf.²¹

This sounds very promising for observant Jews. Judaism requires constant acts of devotion to God, with their accompanying costs of time, energy, and money. The *mitzvot* seem to ensure that we are always giving of ourselves, a constant source of self-sacrifice. However, one’s performance of *mitzvot* does not always retain an air of commitment. The feeling of forced compliance would limit the salience of cost associated with that action. Cost will not be attributed to one’s belief system if participation can be attributed to compulsory participation. Feelings of this type would be particularly acute for children, forced by their parents, and students, forced by their schools. To combat this problem, two suggestions might prove helpful.

First, the notion of cost should demonstrate the importance of devoting time and resources outside of the synagogue or the school settings. When congregants or students take part in learning or other *mitzvah* behaviors beyond the confines of the regularly scheduled activities, they are more likely to feel a sense of commitment based on the time and energy which they are dedicating.²² Time and energy spent in school are not viewed as “commitment” on the part of students because they can easily attribute this effort to outside pressure. Secondly, educators and rabbis should carefully evaluate their teaching methods. To encourage students to be more engaged in Torah learning, one might be tempted to simplify the endeavor as much as possible and make it easily accessible. While a class should not be beyond the capabilities of its students, the effort that students devote will affect their relationship to the class (cost perception). Greater effort can foster more positive attitudes towards the class,²³

²¹ Ayelet Gneezy, *ibid.*

²² If these activities are completely voluntary, or minimally incentivized, then these activities may also benefit from a sense of choice, which are more likely to create the desired effect, as per the previous section.

²³ Joel Cooper and Robert T. Croyle, “Attitudes and attitude change,” *Annual Review of Psychology* 35 (1984): 408–409.

which can then result in better performance.²⁴ Being challenged by Torah learning and applying more effort can increase the sense of cost and commitment to the school experience.

3. *Conceptual and perceptual associations*: As the *Hinnukh* explains, on the first night of Passover we act like free people. This draws our hearts toward the associated feelings and repercussions. Cognitive dissonance and self-perception would account for this idea, as would embodied cognition. However, in experiencing these benefits, we are limited by our psychological associations between the concept of freedom and leaning at the table, to pick one example. If our internal schemas of freedom are not cognitively associated with leaning, then the act of leaning will not trigger feelings of freedom.

This, too, is critical for understanding the experiences of children and students. Our students are raised in a milieu vastly different than that of our sages of the past. Actions which carried ethical or intellectual associations may no longer convey the same ideas. To use the previous example, having children lean at the table will no longer automatically make them feel free. In this area, recognizing outside influences can be difficult, but shifts in cultural perception are key. Combating these changes is challenging, but helping students engross themselves in the past may help alleviate this issue. Helping students take a perspective outside their own could help them create new associations.

Conclusion

The principle presented by the *Sefer ha-Hinnukh* is not quite as simple as it might appear, but it is borne out in psychological research. Theorists propose a range of processes which might explain it, and the implications of these theories should be considered when initiating educational programs in synagogues and in schools. Simple repetition does not necessarily produce the desired results. Rabbis and educators could utilize the tools contributed by psychologists to create a context for *mitzvah* performance which will promote positive attitudes and continued performance in the future. Our constantly expanding knowledge about the human psyche can overturn previously held beliefs, or help shed light on and develop age-old ideas. In this case, the importance of choice, cost, and our perceptual associations should not be overlooked; they must be taken to heart. 

²⁴ Simon Draycott and Alan Dabbs cite evidence for greater commitment to a weight loss program demonstrated through greater weight loss after “completing difficult perceptual tasks during therapy, although these tasks were unrelated to the goal of weight loss” (ibid: 350).